DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 550 FL 006 135

AUTHOR Herrlitz, Wolfgang
TITLE Linguistic Remarks on Native Language Teaching.
PUB DATE Dec 73
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Applied Linguistics; Curriculum; *Curriculum Development; *English Instruction; Language Development; *Language Instruction; Learning Theories; Linguistic Competence; Linguistics; Psycholinguistics; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The possible relevance linguistics could have for curriculum development in native language teaching is explored. The discussion focuses on three question: (1) Does the study of linguistic theory in school contribute to the development of the students' language competence? (2) Is the study of language a subject worth teaching? (3) Can linguistic study of communication in the classroom contribute to the development of language behavior? Language study is viewed here as a necessary and worthwhile activity because it expands the students' ability to critically analyze language use, various attitudes toward language behavior and social conditions, and the impact of linguistic differences. Linguists need to study language development under school conditions, so that major problems can be identified and alternatives designed in terms of language learning situations and optimal environments. In addition, careful analysis of the linguistic environment outside school and of its impact on language behavior should be considered a precondition for successful innovations in native language teaching. Theoretical language study must be integrated with actual language use in the classroom. Under this fundamental condition of integration, the study of language theory plays an important role in the language learning process. (PMP)

Wolfgang Herrlitz
Deutsches Seminar der Universität
74 Tübingen, Fed. Rep. Germany

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

December 1973

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED101550

Linguistic Remarks on Native Language Teaching

0. During the entire development of modern linguistics in this century (in the United States as well as in Europe), linguists have claimed that their theories and methods had a great importance for language teaching, teaching a second language as well as the mother tongue at school. In spite of these claims and in spite of continous attempts to influence language teaching, these efforts especially in the field of the first language are controversial and not at all accepted to a larger extent. The movement of curriculum research and development which has changed the teaching of mathematics, science and social studies e.g. in the United States, Great Britain, Sweden and, recently, Germany, had only marginal influence on one of the core subjects: the teaching of the native language and the national literature. Moreover it is fair to state, I think, that the research native language teaching should be based on is not very far developed, so that we do not know very much about the development of language competence at school or about the development of "oracy" and literacy and its conditions between the age of five and eighteen.

FL006135

It is in this context that I want to explore the possible relationship between linguistics (in the broad sense of the study of language behaviour) and the curriculum of native language teaching and to determine the relevance linguistics could have for the curriculum development in this subject area. This relevance seems to depend upon the answers to the following questions:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

(a) Does the study of linguistic theory at school contribute to the development of language competence of the students?

(b) Is the study of language a subject worthwhile to be taught at school?

(c) Can linguistic study of the communication in the classroom and its conditions contribute to the development of language behavior?

Whereas the first two questions are well known and have been extensively discussed, the third is hardly asked but nevertheless is most important, so I want to focus especially on this topic, exploring the first two only briefly.

1. It is broadly accepted that the study of grammar (in the sense of general rules for language behavior of all kinds) has no or only very little impact on the development of language competence and its realizations in communicational situations. The growth of oracy and literacy does not seem to be influenced by intensive teaching of generalizations about word order, systems of tense and modality, structure of paragraphs etc. Research shows that, in spite of time and motivation consuming efforts in training rules of orthography, spelling does not improve between the fifth and the ninth grade. The study of grammar is looked at as a superfluous activity that is a relic from times when people believed in connections between grammar (especially Latin grammar) and logical thinking.

Basically, this attitude has not changed when traditional grammar was substituted by structural grammar and structural grammar by transformational grammar. The reason for this is that the major critical point is still justified: accumulating information about generalizations on language structure and language behavior has little or no influence on language learning, and therefore the study of grammar cannot be justified by the aim of competence development. Modern linguistics, in

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

spite of its increase in explicity, consistency and simplicity have not contributed to this goal, because learning language does not work the same way as learning grammar (in the sense of acquiring knowledge about language rules in a conscious way).

The conclusion is that the aim of developing language behavior evidently does not justify the study of grammar at school (whether it is traditional or structural or transformational theory underlying this study). Other reasons have to be given to support the hypotheses that modern linguistics in fact is very important for native language teaching.

2. The second question ("Is the study of language a subject worthwhile to be taught at school?") is hard to answer, because it is difficult to solve the problem of selection between a large number of possible disciplines and an even larger amount of theories and information they offer. There is a lack of unambiguous criteria which judgements and decisions could be based on, and obviously a lot of controversial value judgements are involved, depending on the discipline in which a particular person works. But there are at least some points of orientation the discussion of this question can rely on. One criterion is whether the study of the discipline contributes to the development of human abilities and behavior; another criterion is whether studying the basic structure of the discipline provides fundamental insights into our social life and natural environment; a third criterion may be whether studying that discipline serves as a powerful example for pedagogical notions like "learning how to learn", "inquiry/discovery approach", "self-defined project work", etc. None of these criteria allow nice simple binary decisions, but each at least provides the base for discussion which may establish a hierarchy of content under the aspect of importance for the school curriculum.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In this hierarchy, linguistics (according to the established criteria) will score quite high if it meets certain conditions:

(a) Linguistic theory has to account for the complexity of language behavior and its situational and social conditions; it must give insight into language variation as well as linguistic attitude so that it matches the experience of communication through language and its problems in the student's life.

(b) Language study (as a part of social studies) must be related to inquiry into other major fields of human behavior and symbolic interaction (e.g. role play and the establishment of social relationships, language and learning, construction of scientific theories as a means of communication, etc.), so that the basic approach of the social sciences can be made explicit.

(c) The methodology of linguistic inquiry has to be made clear so that the student of language behavior can work as a linguist with the tools of a linguist on major problems of language.

It has to be pointed out that language study in the described sense is not only an activity worthwhile engaging in because it gives insight into fundamental notions of human nature; language study also has great impact on the development of language behavior because it expands the ability of critically analizing language use, attitudes towards language behavior ("good language" vs. "bad language") and social conditions and impacts of linguistic differences ("black English", "restricted code"). Language study can add a new level of awareness towards our attitudes and social behavior, and this awareness may shift not only our thinking but also our actions in this important field.

At the moment there seems to be not enough evidence on the outcome of language study which could support this hypothesis, simply, because we have not sufficient experience teaching linguistic inquiry at school. But yet thinking through this exercise is at least for me persuasive enough to justify the expectation that both students and teachers will benefit a lot not only in knowledge but also in attitude and behavior.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

3. As already mentioned, these first two questions have been discussed a lot in papers about native language teaching, whereas the analysis of verbal communication at school and its conditions from a linguistic point of view has hardly started. If we look at language learning in informal setups outside school (where without doubt language learning takes place in the most successful way), this lack of research is surprising for a number of reasons: (1) children learn the native language on the basis of the verbal behavior they experience in their environment (and of course on the basis of their "innate" abilities; (2) as it is true for the whole process of socialization, this kind of learning depends to a certain extent on the linguistic structure that is provided by the situation they happen to live in; (3) the acquisition of language depends on variables of the linguistic situation and on the kinds of linguistic activities that take place in that situation; (4) obvious and indispensible needs for communication provide great motivation for language learning; (5) there is some "talking about language" (i.e. some sort of theoretical approach to language) by the child, but these uses of "linguistic theory" are very much integrated into the acquisition of communicational means (so that abstract generalizations about language behavior are not components that function in this learning process). There is enough evidence that the linguistic environment and the language activities in it play a very important role in language learning, and that especially these two variables are crucial for analizing difficulties and differences that occur in competence acquisition (obviously the most interesting phenomena from an educational point of view).

I can see no reason why the structure of informal language learning outside school should not apply also to formal language learning in school. Nevertheless, forms and processes of communications at school and their

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

situational conditions are very much restricted, and the efforts towards development of oracy and literacy rely on very abstract exercises (as described above) with nearly no influence on language learning and without a context that provides realistic purposes of communication. There is, I think, much evidence that the problems of native language teaching at school are due to the differences between informal and formal learning situations, i.e. with the poverty of linguistic environment school provides.

Even worse, we do not really know what goes on: we have fairly little insight into the development of oracy and literacy under school conditions, so that we are not able to identify major problems, analyze their conditions and design alternatives in terms of language learning situations and optimal environments. Fundamental questions like the following are hardly touched:

(a) What is the structure of the development of oracy and literacy at school? Are there e.g. special stages (like the stages of cognitive growth Piaget has proposed)? What are the conditions of differences in this development?

(b) What is the structure of variation between oracy and literacy? What are the reasons for these variations?

(c) What is the impact of teaching and learning patterns (like teacher's lecture, small group discussion, individualized learning, open classroom) on language learning at school?

(d) What is the role of communication and verbalization (e.g. posing of questions, identification and discussion of problems, formulation of hypotheses, protocol of solutions) in the process of learning?

These questions open a broad field of research in which various disciplines should engage. I do not claim that all problems in this area can be solved by linguistic inquiry, nor that the theoretical discussion in contemporary linguistics provides an ideal basis for this research. But I think that linguistic analysis of educational discourse and the environment in which that discourse takes place can contribute in important ways to answering

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the questions we have posed. Some big steps in this direction have already been taken, e.g. by Cook and Gumpertz in the U.S. and by Barnes, Forsyth, Adelman and Stubbs in the U.K. But it is still necessary to think about the theoretical basis of that research, about the integration of possibly useful linguistic approaches like theory of language variation, text linguistics, pragmatics and performative analysis etc., not to mention the difficulties describing the social and situational conditions educational discourse depends on. From the pedagogical point of view these conditions (like teaching and learning styles, role structure, system of assessment etc.) are crucial because they are the variables we can manipulate to influence language learning. So the description of these conditions and their impact on verbal behavior has to be identified as the basis of reasonable curriculum design (not only in native language teaching but in all subjects language learning takes place).

I am not at all convinced that with the omission of "teaching grammar" and with the establishment of a "rich linguistic environment" (like occasions for creative writing about everything) the problems of native language learning will be solved automatically. It seems to me that careful analysis of this linguistic environment and its impact on language behavior is a precondition for successful innovations in native language teaching. Progress of linguistic research in this area is more likely to change education than linguistics has been so far.

4. Talking about curriculum development in native language teaching in terms of studying and manipulating the environment language behavior takes place in does not mean excluding theoretical approaches towards language (like the kind of "language study" we have discussed above): it even does not exclude studying "grammar" (in the sense of "generalizations about language behavior"). The most important condition for the success

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of such theoretical approaches (on several levels) is that they are integrated into the actual use of language in that particular school environment. Language learning of very small children in informal learning setups give a lot of evidence that "talking about language" goes along with the acquisition of verbal competence from a fairly early time: these talks identify linguistic problems as well as particular features of language attitudes. In this sense theory building about language is not necessarily a very abstract activity that is limited to upper parts of high school; if it is motivated by actual problems in language behavior, grammar and language study can be integrated into the development of oracy and literacy. Moreover, analyses in and generalizations about language behavior are an essential part of natural language teaching if the general aim is not merely competence development but consciousness about linguistic problems, language attitudes and relative success or failure of communication. My hypothesis is that, under the fundamental condition of integration, theoretical approaches to language behavior (on different levels of abstraction) play an important role in the process of language learning and that the student's role as learner includes the role of a linguist (i.e. of a researcher in the field of language behavior).

Critics may argue that I continue to preach the old optimism linguists have expressed towards linguistic impacts on native language learning. The important thing is that I claim that impact on the basis of different reasons: the major contribution is the analysis of verbal behavior in the context of social and situational conditions at school; this analysis provides a basis for structured and legitimized curriculum development in the area of native language learning and in the area of growth in oracy and literacy through manipulation of environments in formal education. The integration of linguistic practice and linguistic analysis may be the most characteristic feature of that new curriculum.